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ABSTRACT

The Lycoming County Literacy Project based in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, examined both traditional and family literacy General Educational Development (GED) program participants to determine which programs produce the best results. GED test scores were collected from instructors teaching both traditional and family literacy GED participants. Test score data were not comparable due to the length of the study and participant point of entry. Research showed adult participants in family literacy programs had a higher attendance rate than traditional GED classes. Data collected from study families showed that, while participants in family literacy programs had higher attendance rates overall, there was only a 4 percent increase in the attendance rate between traditional and family literacy GED programs. (YLB)

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PRODUCT

"Pennsylvania Action Research Network:
Staff Development Through
Six Professional Development Centers"

Project Number 099-99-9010
July 1998-June 1999

Project Director
Dr. Gary Kuhne
Assistant Professor and Regional Director of Adult Education
The Pennsylvania State University

Note: Action Research is a process of systematic inquiry credited to Kurt Lewin who popularized it in the U.S. in the 1940"s. Today it is considered a system of qualitative research. Typical of action research, none of the individual projects in this monograph series claims to have generalizable application beyond the specific project described. However, each monograph report can serve to be illustrative, instructive and provides the potential for replication in other locations. For a level of generalizability, it is recommended that the reader seek common patterns in the monograph reports in this series, and the wider literature, or contact the Action Research Network for assistance in this.

I. ABSTRACT

Traditional GED classes offered by the Lycoming County Literacy Project may not meet the needs of the entire family. Traditional programs do not always make considerations for items such as childcare, parenting issues, transportation needs, heath care needs, and the financial responsibilities of the family. Many of these factors are given as reasons why students stop attending GED classrooms.

This project examined both traditional and family literacy GED program participants to determine which programs produce the best results. G.E.D. test scores were collected form instructors instructing both traditional and family literacy GED participants. Test score data was not comparable due to the length of the study and participant point of entry. Research shows adults participating in family literacy programs have a higher attendance rate than traditional GED classes. Data collected from our families showed while participants in family literacy programs had higher attendance rates overall there was only a 4% increase in attendance rate between traditional and family literacy GED programs.

II. PROBLEM

Lycoming County Literacy Project in based in Williamsport and serves the largest county geographically in the state of Pennsylvania. In Lycoming County 8.5% of adults have less than an eighth grade education, 25.5% of adults do not have a high school diploma. The need in Lycoming County has obviously been established. Services to serve these needs have been established however, the population which needs these services most often has other barriers to attending. In particular, single parent families in need of literacy services such as attainment of their GED have multiple barriers preventing them to take advantage of our services. In the fall of 1998 our program began a family literacy program. Before the fall of 1998 GED classes have been available to our students only in traditional classroom form. The family literacy program has allowed us to work more intensively with parents to "remove" some of their barriers including child care, transportation, case management, and more flexible scheduling. By examining GED participant success and attendance records our program could begin to see if putting intensive case management, flexible scheduling, etc. in place would indeed increase participant success rate. If

greater success rates could be proven through family literacy services our program would benefit by showing our community collaborators and service providers the benefits of working with families as a unit instead of individuals. This knowledge would also be used as a tool to encourage collaborations between community agencies and our program. This knowledge would allow community service providers to see the relevance of support services and to encourage service providers to provide a more holistic approach to social service, in particular literacy issues. Knowledge gained as to GED classroom best practices could also be used as a tool to examine our program for areas which families and service providers might see as weaknesses.

III. PLANNING

The method for completing this project was data collection and analysis. I studied both traditional and family literacy GED classroom records to determine if one class scored higher on test scores and/or had higher attendance rates. I began by examining attendance records and test score records for participants who joined either the traditional GED or family literacy GED classes. Test scores were collected on participants who entered either program between 12/1/1998 and 4/19/99. In addition to classroom attendance and test scores an informal questioning process was also completed to determine reasons why participants preferred or thought they were more successful in one program as compared to another.

To collect data 20 GED student records from 7/1 through 11/30, 1998 were randomly selected to use as a baseline point of comparison. The percentage of classes attended was calculated by dividing the number of class hours available by the number of class hours scheduled for a particular participant. For example, if a participant attended 8 out of 10 scheduled class hours their percentage of attendance would be 8/10 or 80%. This was calculated for 20 randomly selected GED students from the baseline group and averaged. The average attendance percentage for the baseline group was a 49% attendance rate over a five month period. Data was also collected form current family literacy participants enrolled during the projects timeframe. After collecting the aforementioned date I asked the question, Will enrolling GED participants who qualify for family literacy programs increase their attendance and success rates significantly, 20% or more.

Research indicates many benefits from family literacy programs.

Short-term benefits: Current research from the National Center for Family Literacy shows that family literacy programming is more effective than traditional approaches to adult education for the most vulnerable adults and children. NCFL has used standardized assessments, case studies, anecdotal records, parent surveys and interviews, and staff observations to evaluate all aspects of the program. Early finding indicate that both parents and children made important gains as a result of attending family literacy programs.

NCFL studies on families with reading and math scores who averaged were between 6th and 7th grade reading levels showed 30% of adult students either received GED certification during the program year, passes parts of the exam, or had scheduled the exam at the end of the program year. *Breaking the Cycle of Illiteracy: The Kenan Family Literacy Model Program (NCFL, 1989).*

Adults participating in family literacy programs showed greater gains in literacy than adults in adult-focused programs. Participants in family literacy programs were less likely to drop out of the program than were participants in adult focused programs. *The Power of Family Literacy (NCFL, 1996).*

Long-term benefits: It was found that one year after leaving family literacy programs 66% of adults were either enrolled or had definite plans for re-enrolling in some form of higher or continuing education program or were employed. One year after the program 35% of participants were employed, while fewer than 10% were employed at the time they enrolled in the program. *Study of the Impact of the Kenan Trust Model for Family Literacy (NCFL, 1991).*

NCFL documented results of data collected from 30 sites across the country in 1997 showing that adults made significant changes in their lives. 54% of adults seeking educational credentials received the GED or its equivalent. 40% were enrolled in some higher education or training program. 50% of those not currently enrolled in an education or training program are employed. Although I have not chosen to focus on the progress of children and or parents and children together, results for these areas are also similar.

IV. ACTION

Before data collection began several factors were considered to ensure each group received the same instruction. This was achieved by making sure all students had the same GED instructor

and used the same text. The only differences between traditional GED classroom participants and family literacy participants were outside factors such as childcare, intensive case management, and having children between the ages of birth and not completed third grade (family literacy eligibility criteria).

As data collection began it quickly became relevant that our traditional GED students would far out number family literacy GED students. This posed problems in comparing data. To compensate for student differences the same number, although a smaller participant pool, of family literacy participants and traditional GED participants were used to do comparisons.
Problems also arose with selecting students randomly. By selecting students randomly the possibility of contacting that particular student to ascertain why they left the program or had attendance problems was diminished substantially. There are several possibilities for students who could not be contacted, moved within the city, moved anywhere outside the city, chose not to respond, etc. The only category for these former GED students all fit into was "unable to contact". GED test scores also proved not to be valid measures of success during the project time period. Many students did not test during this time period or only tested in certain subject areas which could not be compared from student to student. Because of the small numbers of participant comparing groups average test scores did not work either as one particular low test score could dramatically alter the group average.

Attendance proved to be the most easily quantifiable measure of "success" Attendance records were kept and percent of classes attended were calculated based on number of class hours available and actual attendance.

V. RESULTS

After comparing and gathering data on GED test scores of both traditional and family literacy GED participants it became clear that comparisons could not be made because of the time frame and different points of entry from particular participants. Many students came to the literacy project because school district programs had large class sizes and little one on one help was available. For this reason many students who could be described as lower level decided to attend literacy program GED classes. On the contrary family literacy GED program participants came to the program for reasons such as added benefits for their children, more flexible scheduling, or they were mandated by assistance office case workers. For these reasons as well as limited test scores

available during the projects time frame test score comparison could not be made. Attendance records were however compared between the two groups. Attendance percentages for participants mandated to attend were not used as this skews the percentages in favor of family literacy. It was discovered by examining 12 randomly selected traditional GED participants that their percentage of attendance was 41% meaning students showed up for 41% of their scheduled hours. Family literacy participants had a slightly higher percentage of attendance at 45%.

VI. REFLECTION

Research indicated that family literacy programs are indeed more successful at retaining participants. This project did indeed support research findings, however, 4% is not a large percentage difference particularly in a study this size (24 participants). With a pool of participants this size one extremely low attendance percentage can drastically alter program results. Perhaps the most important aspect in terms of relevance for our program is looking at the reasons participants gave for not attending programs as often as they would like. Our program can now look at the reasons given and decide what we as a program can to alleviate some of these barriers. Reasons given for poor attendance and or dropping out of traditional GED programs were as follows:

* Interference with job
* No time
* Got GED
* Making no accomplishments
* Humiliating

I believe the results were as expected, family literacy programs have higher attendance rate, however I believe the minimal difference can be accounted for by a combination of different factors: 1) the length of the study and 2) the number of participants 3) different points of entry for participants 4) the timing of the study (holiday/flu season) and 5) the differences between family literacy participants and traditional GED participants, those being children, age, availability of day care and transportation. Family literacy participants are much more likely due to the nature of the program to have children enrolled in preschool, have access to transportation services, and the benefits of a case manager to trouble shoot potential barriers and offer encouragement. Another possibility for results not as impressive as national research suggests is the age of our

family literacy program. The Lycoming County Literacy Project began our family literacy program in the fall of 1998. When this study began our program was only beginning and has been through several revisions since it's inception and I would expect changes to continue on a smaller scale for the 1999-2000 grant year.